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AUTHOR Harley, Kay
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ABSTRACT

This purposes of this presentation were to: (1) document the gap between self-assessment and faculty assessment of students' writing ability at Saginaw Valley State University; (2) analyse possible causes for the gap; and (3) suggest four ways to review the gap. Survey data were gathered from introductory history, political science, management, philosophy, and sociology classes as part of a pilot project. While the particular survey differed in different courses so that results cannot be compared exactly, these surveys clearly indicated that student perceptions of their writing abilities were greater than faculty perceptions of those abilities; and that while most students agree college students have inadequate writing skills, the individual student does not appear to believe that he/she is one of that majority. A primary cause for this gap is that students and faculty differ in what they understand to be required to write successfully in college courses. Findings suggest how the gap might be closed: (1) educate faculty outside of English about incoming students' entrance level skills in writing; (2) provide students with some detailed assessments of their writing ability in several courses; (3) explore with faculty their contrary but necessary roles as coach and judge; and (4) help students perceive and apply approaches to writing learned in one context to new contexts. (RS)

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Contrasts in Student and Faculty Perceptions of Student Writing Ability

Dr. Kay Harley
Saginaw Valley State University

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In evaluating the Write-to-Learn program at Saginaw Valley State University, we have explored both student and faculty attitudes toward writing as well as trying to measure improvement in student writing ability. One issue that has emerged in our evaluations is that student and faculty perceptions of student writing ability differ substantially. In this presentation I will

1) Document the gap between self-assessment and faculty assessment of students' writing ability, using survey data gathered in a pilot project run in Winter 1990 which used undergraduate student writing assistants in selected courses across the university.

2) Analyze possible causes for this gap in terms of differences in student and faculty perceptions of what is required to write successfully in college courses.

3) Present four ways to narrow this gap.

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First, then, I want to document that student and faculty perceptions of student writing ability differ markedly. At SVSU, as elsewhere, the general perception among faculty is that student writing skill is weak; this is reflected "anecdotally" in the stories faculty tell about their students' writing and in documents such as a recent Task Force report that highlighted writing as a major

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weakness in our current undergraduate program. Survey data from introductory history, political science, management, philosophy and sociology classes have given us a clear picture of this gap. While the particular survey differed in different courses so the results can not be compared exactly, these surveys clearly indicated the following:

First, student perceptions of their writing abilities are greater than faculty perceptions of those abilities. Well over half of the students rated their skills as good or very good whereas instructors ranked less than a quarter in that category. 10% or fewer students admitted to poor skills; instructors ranked 30% or more as poor. When asked to assess more specific skills such as abilities to define concepts, write coherent paragraphs, and structure writing into the appropriate form called for by an assignment, two-thirds of the students ranked themselves highly. Their management professor responded: their "perception seems to be that they know how to write. This is clearly not the case. Perhaps this is a key aspect to the problem—unless they think they have a problem, why should they change?"

Our students do agree that writing skills are critical to professional success (only 9% disagreed). More than half also agreed that most college students do not have adequate writing skills. Over three quarters indicated a willingness to work hard to enhance their writing skills—though the willingness indicated in the survey was not borne out through making time to work with the instructor or student writing assistant.

However, there is a clear contradiction between their general perception of student writing abilities and their perception of their own ability. They agree that most college students don't have adequate writing skills, but don't appear to believe that they are one of that majority. While

political scientists remind us that it is difficult to get accurate self-assessments through opinion polls, nonetheless these discrepancies make faculty raise the question voiced by a history professor: "How do you shock them out of their complacency?"

In summary, then, we found that students say

1) they believe writing is important for professional success
2) they are willing to work to enhance their writing skill
3) they do not believe that most college students have adequate writing skills
4) their own writing skills are more than adequate
5) don't perceive a need for more help with their writing assignments.

Faculty, however, feel that students are often misperceiving their own writing ability, lack adequate skills, and are not seeking out tutorial help when they should.

If, then, a gap exists between student and faculty perceptions of student writing ability, what are its causes? A primary cause is that students and faculty differ in what they understand to be required to write successfully in college courses. Faculty in WAC workshops at SVSU consistently view successful writing as including the ability

to support and develop a proposition

to move between data and generalization, such as by tying examples to main points

to present ideas in a carefully organized structure so that the relationship between them is clear

to be clear and concise

to present work without major errors in mechanics, punctuation and spelling.

Students, in contrast, tend to define good writing only in terms of surface correctness. While composition courses may introduce issues like purpose, audience, structure, voice and logic, many students still tend to separate writing from the cognitive processes inherent in it; they think of successful writing only in terms of being free of errors and overlook the role played by organization, clarity, and the use of evidence. So one cause for the gap is that students and faculty are defining what is needed to write well in different terms.

Secondly, while faculty in workshops may stress how integral the ability to communicate in writing is to mastery of their discipline, their grading policies in particular courses may not reflect this belief. Even faculty who do stress writing in their courses tend to separate "writing" from "content" when grading. The example of a management professor who, for a series of short assignments throughout the semester, gave 3 points to writing skills and 2 points to content is a rare one and even this emphasis on writing ability became diminished in the students' eyes because other components in the course had greater weight. The instructor had hoped to provide a minimal risk opportunity for the students to improve their writing and learning. Despite his intentions, he felt the message received by students was "the written assignments aren't that important since the reward/penalty isn't high." His conclusion was that "either the reward/penalty needs to be greater or a better communication effort (convincing them of the importance of the writing) is needed."

Another example of an instructor who worked to make his grading reflect his emphasis on writing can be seen in a grading sheet used by a sociology instructor. The students were asked to do weekly short papers in which they described an event which they had experienced and to analyze it using a sociological concept listed at the end of the chapter assigned for the week.

Grading Sheet

Soc. 211
A. Ross

Points Awarded

+4 Initial points. In this paper you were asked to describe an event which you have experienced and to analyze it using a sociological concept (or set of concepts listed at the end of the chapter assigned for this week.

__ +1 Your paper provides a particularly insightful use of the concept.

__ −1 The concept is incorrectly defined. Review it with the help of the text or your instructor.

or

__ −1 The concept does not appear applicable to the event reported. Perhaps another concept would be more useful.

__ −1 Careless grammar and mechanical errors. Proofread your paper before submitting it.

or

__ −2 Serious grammatical and mechanical problems. The paper contains faulty sentence structure, five or more misspellings, or serious organizational problems.

__ Paper score (sum)

5 pts.	A
3–4 pts.	B
2 pts.	C
1 pt.	D

_____

Not only does this make clear what the assignment calls for; it also shows that serious organizational problems and faulty sentence structure are important issues, and not just spelling or punctuation. The instructor justified his system of the two-point penalty being related to grammar and writing, not the sociological concept, by saying that he wanted to work first on getting students to write well because if students cannot write clearly about the subject matter, then the knowledge is virtually useless. However, a year later he had abandoned this grading sheet, uneasy that it did not emphasize "content" sufficiently.

My point with these two examples is to show how thorny an issue grading of writing is, even for those instructors who use writing-to-learn strategies, carefully structure their writing assignments, and want their grading to reflect the value they place on effective writing in mastering the discipline they are teaching.

More typical than the examples of these two instructors who are seeking to merge "writing" and "content" are the faculty members who specify to students that they will take off 1/2 point for each spelling error, but do not directly call students' attention to organization or clear focus or support through example as other criteria by which they are evaluating student writing. Faculty grading policies such as these may contribute to students' limited or inaccurate notion of what successful writing involves. The overemphasis on surface errors prevents students from sufficiently grasping the other ingredients necessary to effective writing and may contribute to their inaccurate perception of their own abilities.

Faculty across the disciplines, then, may not provide students with the kind of assessment they need both to understand the role that writing plays in mastering and communicating their discipline-based knowledge and to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses. In part this may reflect the faculty's lack of confidence. While faculty may know that something is poorly written, they may not feel confident in stating why or how to fix the weakness and therefore not bring the weakness directly to the students' attention. Because students don't get frequent realistic assessments of their writing strengths and weaknesses in many courses, including those in their major and minor, they may resent and dismiss such an assessment when it comes, either in an upper division writing course or from a single professor whose grading is strongly influenced by the student's writing ability. This may also explain who so few students whom faculty feel need

extra tutoring with their writing actually seek out such help on a continuing basis. The students simply fail to believe their skills are not good enough since many continue to get average or above average grades in their courses even though instructors claim their skills are weak.

Having suggested some possible causes for this gap between student and faculty assessment of student writing ability, I would now like to offer four suggestions about how the gap might be closed.

1. Educate faculty outside of English about what entrance level skills in writing they might realistically expect through having them read a selection of placement writing samples to understand the range of abilities of entering students. None of our faculty outside of English regularly read placement essays and many of them overestimate the writing abilities of our incoming students. Therefore, they do not understand the extent to which they may need to explain, model and sequence their writing assignments so that students can gain a clear understanding of what is expected of them and how they might go about it.

2. Provide students with some detailed assessments of their writing ability in several courses. If only a single content-area instructor or only an English composition class provides this assessment, students appear to dismiss it. General education courses and designated courses in a major and minor required course sequence need to make explicit the criteria by which writing is judged and provide students with standards of good performance against which their own work can be measured. These assessments need to reflect the larger concerns the faculty value in writing—i.e., the ability to develop and support a proposition, to present ideas in a carefully organized structure, to apply and integrate theory and example, to write in the

accepted style and voice of the discipline—as well as emphasize mastery of the conventions of spelling and punctuation.

Efforts also need to be made to ensure that students understand the criteria by which they are being judged so that their self-evaluation or evaluation by their peers begins to approximate the evaluations made by faculty. We asked students in the courses surveyed whether they understood their writing assignments, understood what was expected of them (such as define terms, provide examples, present a coherent objective essay), understood the instructor's comments on their paper, and agreed with those comments. At the end of the courses, a strong majority of students indicated they had these understandings. While fewer stated they agreed with the comments, most agreed that they understood them. Such understanding is essential if students are to come to evaluate their own writing by the standards the faculty wishes them to meet.

3. Explore with faculty Peter Elbow's idea of the two contrary but necessary roles of an instructor: coach and judge. Elbow in "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process" suggests that good teaching involves two conflicting obligations: an obligation to students and an obligation to knowledge and society. Each of these obligations requires a different mentality. The role of coach derives from our desire to help more students learn more. As Elbow says, "Our loyalty to students asks us to be their allies and hosts as we instruct and share: to invite all students to enter in and join us as members of a learning community—even if they have difficulty. Our commitment to students asks us to assume they are all capable of learning, to see things through their eyes, to help bring out their best rather than their worst when it comes to tests and grades. By taking this inviting stance we will help more

of them learn." (328) Elbow argues that a very different role emerges from our obligation to serve knowledge, culture and institutions. "But our commitment to knowledge and society asks us to be guardians or bouncers: we must discriminate, evaluate, test, grade, certify. We are invited to stay true to the inherent standards of what we teach, whether or not that stance fits the particular students before us. We have a responsibility to society—that is, to our discipline, our college or university, and to other learning communities of which we are members—to see that the students we certify really understand or can do what we teach, to see that the grades and credits and degrees we give really have the meaning or currency they are supposed to have." (328)

Many composition instructors are strong coaches, reading for potential meaning, building student confidence and sense of ownership in the context of the writing process; we need to also make sure that composition instructors provide students with assessments of their "products" that have some equivalence to those made by faculty across the university or the larger society. (I realize this point is challenged by those who argue that each discipline has its own discourse community and there is less common ground between them than has been assumed.) Nonetheless, I think composition teachers may need to acknowledge their role as guardian or bouncer more directly that they do while at the same time advocating that faculty across the disciplines must share this responsibility.

4. Help students perceive and apply approaches to writing learned in one context to new contexts. My analysis of assignments in introductory courses at SVSU shows that faculty are making quite consistent writing demands on students and share assumptions about what constitutes effective writing appropriate to an academic discourse community; students need

to understand these connections. This can be accomplished when a political science instructor provides tips for how to take essay exams drawn from the required composition handbook (or at least knows such tips are available there), or a philosophy instructor who says "writing a particular kind of essay according to a certain format is...a skill I expect students to acquire during the course of the semester. I don't expect them to be able to write wonderful essays from the beginning....I provide them with what amounts to an outline of the essay I want them to write." Such instructors help students see how to apply writing skills in new contexts demanded by particular courses.

I've assumed throughout that students should develop a realistic sense of their writing abilities and that it is a university-wide responsibility to provide students with such assessments. If faculty believe that student writing abilities need to be improved, we have to demonstrate that belief in concrete ways—through emphasizing the relationship of writing and thinking and the effort needed for these tasks, though modeling the importance of written communication in our disciplines, through carefully planning and sequencing writing assignments so they help students achieve the skills we believe are important, through grading that reflects the importance we place on writing, through detailed assessments that let students see their strengths and weaknesses. We need to lead students to evaluate their own writing—and that of their peers and of practitioners in the fields they are studying—by the criteria of the discourse communities they propose to enter.

If we believe that students have problems with their writing we need to help them see and acknowledge this too. We know there are few quick fixes. However, unless students think they have a problem, why should they change? And many don't appear to think they have a problem, despite the cries from so many professional groups for more able communicators. While universi-

ties can administer upper-division competency tests or devise other ways to pinpoint students with skills so weak they should not graduate, I believe a more fruitful approach would be to close the gap between student and faculty assessments of student writing ability.

Works Cited

Elbow, Peter. "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process." *College English* 45 (1983): 327–339.